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ABSTRACT

Despite the repeated adage that "no two LD (learning disabled) students are alike, it is not only possible but important to focus on the most common errors of LD college writers in order to learn how best to serve these students. There are in fact two main categories of these students: severely learning disabled and classically learning disabled. For severely learning disabled students, most academic tasks are equally difficult if not impossible to master. Classically learning disabled writers usually have something intelligent to say and write, as long as they are given extra time to express it. The most common errors for LD students include spelling errors and the omission of articles, demonstratives, prepositions, verbs, and word endings. They also tend to make numerous comma errors and to write meaningless sentences. Punctuation is by far the most difficult area for LD writers and their tutors. The job of tutors and teachers is to identify a particular student's error pattern by searching for clues in that student's writing. This paper suggests several strategies that could be helpful in dealing with these problems, and concludes that it is important to be patient and never to judge a struggling student until that student has been given every chance to learn. (RS)

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TUTORING STRATEGIES

FOR LD COLLEGE STUDENTS' COMMON WRITING ERRORS

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Many people who work with learning disabled (LD) students repeat the adage that ``no two LD students are alike" like a mantra, perhaps to express the inherent frustration felt by people who work with this diverse population. Nevertheless, I feel that it is not only possible but important to focus on the most common errors of LD college writers in order to learn how best to serve these students.

In my office hangs a card with the Serenity Prayer written on it: ``God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change... The Courage to change the things I can and the Wisdom to know the difference." While this is the prayer commonly associated with Alcoholics Anonymous, I feel it sums up the status of the LD writers I work with at Project Connections, a support service for the LD students at Middlesex County College, in Edison, NJ. As one professor said about one of our students, we can only work with the student's ``God-given talents." We all know that we can never teach a blind person to see; similarly, we cannot teach a dyslexic to spell well. It is a waste of time to drill such students; this is one of the things we cannot change.

However, I do feel that I <u>have</u> helped many of the LD students I work with to become better writers. I am awed by the courage and determination that these students sometimes

use in the face of harsh criticism from naive teachers, beginning often in the students' grammar school when they were ridiculed by teachers and students for being unable to spell simple words or sound out words from basal readers. This is perhaps the first area where we as tutors and teachers can make the biggest difference. We can give consistent positive reinforcement despite student error. We must encourage these students by acknowledging what they did right, including our weakest students who achieve little academic success.

This brings us to one of the least publicly discussed realities in the LD field. While we all know now that ``no two LD students are alike,'' there are in fact two main categories of these students. One of the few places I have seen this issue addressed openly is in Dr. Dolores Perin's introduction to ``Instructing Students with Learning Disabilities: Guidelines for Community College Faculty and Support Staff.'' In this booklet published by City University, Perin discusses the difference between ``severely learning disabled'' and ``classically learning disabled students.'' The following are her definitions:

> In cases where levels of intellectual functioning are relatively low, some students may have been labeled ``slow learners'' or ``underachievers'' in the past. Such students have learning needs that

> are quite different from those with learning disabilities and are sometimes referred to as ``severely learning disabled." They may have been able to obtain high school diplomas but may not be able to comprehend college level material although they may have successful non-credit educational or training experience...
>
> In contrast, the ``classically" learning disabled students have average or above average intellectual ability and, while they demonstrate serious academic problems, they can succeed in college programs, given appropriate types of instruction and support (Perin 1-2).

Although people in the field rarely discuss this publicly for fear of creating the stereotype that all LD students are slow learners or severely learning disabled, the fact is that some of these students do attend colleges with open admission. These students usually have a ``flat" IQ as well as a ``flat" record, meaning that they have no area of relative strength. Most academic tasks are equally difficult if not out right impossible to master. These students may have many of the same errors of ``classical" learning disabled students, but the former have few, if any, of the latter's strengths.

On the other hand, the ``classical" learning disabled writers usually have something intelligent to say and write, as long as they are given extra time to express it in. They in fact do have some type of pattern of error that the tutor and teacher can usually detect after a few sessions. In this regard, tutoring the classical LD student is similar to tutoring an ESL student, except that some types of errors committed by the LD student will never be corrected with time, due to the permanent disability.

Nevertheless, when we are first confronted with the writing samples of even the classical LD student writers, we may be shocked and overwhelmed. According to Carolyn O'Hearn's College English article: ``Typically the error count in a paper written by a learning disabled student may be so high that it interferes seriously with comprehension" (298).

The most common errors for LD students include the omission of articles, demonstratives, prepositions, verbs, and word endings. They also tend to make numerous comma errors and write ``meaningless sentence[s]," according to Noel Gregg, who has written extensively on LD college writers (335). Usually, ``when compared with typical college students, writers with learning disabilities have greater difficulty with certain aspects of mechanics (particularly

spelling), ... they are less fluent (produce fewer words), and ... they are not so diverse in their vocabulary," according to a December 1991 article by Newcomer and Barenbaum in The Journal for Learning Disabilities (587). Of course, while these are the most common errors for the population of classically learning disabled students, each student is unique; few of the classically LD students make all these errors regularly.

Again, our job as tutors and teachers is to identify that particular student's error pattern by searching for clues in each student's writing. Instead of rejecting students' papers in entirety, we should focus on errors that are seen throughout the paper. The following is how I cope with the most common errors:

SPELLING: There are few LD students who are good spellers, and no amount of rhyming rules is going to teach them that "I before E except after C..." Nevertheless, we expect all students to find a way to make spelling corrections on the papers they write at home. We teach students the following strategies:

1. Try the word processor's spelling aid or a hand-held spelling aid like the Franklin Speller. The tutor or teacher may have to teach the student how to use these devices, spending tutoring time doing so.

2. If that does not work because the student's errors are still not recognized by the device (if, for example, the student spells ``earth" as ``THEAR," as one of our students does), the student will need to work with a tutor or family member in making the corrections. While we cannot cure these students from making these errors, we can change their feeling of helplessness. In some extreme cases, a student may need to rely on a scribe, where the words and punctuation are dictated to the scribe by the student. This latter case should only be done when this disability is documented and all other means are exhausted. Software is currently being developed and some is already on the market to help LD students, such as a program that allows students to dictate their essay to the computer, eliminating the need for a scribe.

OMISSIONS and MEANINGLESS SENTENCES: These errors probably frustrate teachers and tutors most. One way to tackle these problems is, in the privacy of a closed office, to ask the student to read the essay aloud - or the tutor should read it aloud to the student. LD students should NEVER be forced to read aloud if they don't want to. Some of the brightest LD students may be brilliant at comprehending a story or essay, but they may not be able to decode easily. In this case, the students should be encouraged to listen to

their essay, making editing corrections as you read it. If the students miss an error, stop and review.

This may be very time consuming, but it works. It is better to read part of the essay aloud and leave the rest rather than to rush through it. This is the only way for many students to ``catch" their own errors. Usually, the students will do the reading and will recognize most of the errors of omission - with the exception of punctuation.

Incidentally, while most college students seem to have read very little, LD college students have often read even less because they often have such difficulty with the task of reading. Again, they may be able to comprehend the books, but not be able to read them. Thus, although we are tutoring in writing, we should encourage our students to read more - even with their ears, by listening to books on tape. They must learn to hear what sounds right grammatically. Furthermore, this will help them improve their vocabulary and their sentence structure. Many students are unaware that most libraries have books on tape available.

PUNCTUATION: This is by far the most difficult area to address. However, the only way I know is through repetition and patience. Never teach more than one rule at a time, and spend some time with the rule. Always teach the rule in context; if the student has left out a comma after every

introductory clause, we spend one session on that rule. We make up a few sentences together, using the rule. Then, we go back and apply it to the essay.

I often tell students that I am not going to be able to help them with every error in the paper, but I will make sure they understand how to correct one major error by the time they leave my office. Of course, if the student has numerous fragments, that will be more important than correcting most comma errors. Any time a rule can be explained with the help a visual aid, I do it. (For example, I keep a plastic mother pig with her suckling piglets on my desk to help explain how the thesis and the supporting paragraphs are linked. Each paragraph is represented by a piglet which is being nurtured by the thesis; the latter is represented by the big pig. I always point out that there are no other animals attached to the mother; each paragraph must be related to the thesis.) These LD students learn best when several channels of learning are used.

Finally, as one English professor said, ``What's good pedagogy for LD students is good pedagogy for all students.'' Working with LD students has made me a better instructor with the non-LD population because I am clearer, more conscious of using different channels to communicate with (such as writing on the board, reading what I write aloud, giving more hand-outs, and being more understanding if

someone asks me to repeat what I just said for the third or fourth time.) In general, I have learned more about how people learn. Although I feel it is important to accept that some of our students may never be college able, I have learned how important it is to be patient and never to judge a struggling student until that student has been given every chance to learn.

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